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ABSTRACT

Adult literacy programs could be improved by determining the learning styles and life-styles of individual students and incorporating the findings into the instructional program. Many researchers have looked at adult students' lives and suggested teaching methods based on the studies. Some suggest using an instrument for identifying adults' learning styles, such as the "Productivity Environmental Preference Survey" by Dunn, Dunn, and Price. An explanation of adult learning styles identified by David Kolb was offered by Kornhonen and McCall. Their work classifies adults as convergers, divergers, assimilators, and accommodators. It also explains the two levels of learning, rote and understanding. Current research shows that a number of people are interested in finding ways of improving literacy programs and sharing their findings with others. Some suggestions from the literature for improving programs include the following: (1) helping students to understand themselves and to understand what reading truly is; (2) keeping the sensitivities of individual students in mind as writing is incorporated in the reading experience; (3) sharing by administrators and instructors of the responsibility for providing the best programs for students; and (4) always keeping in mind the uniqueness of each student. (KC)

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CONSIDERATION OF ADULTS' LEARNING STYLES AND LIFE STYLES FOR BETTER LITERACY PROGRAMS: A DISCUSSION

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Abstract

This paper is addressed to the belief that many of the existing adult literacy programs could be improved by determining the learning styles and life styles of the individual students and incorporating the findings into the instructional programs.

Other means discussed as important for improved programs follow: 1. Helping the students to understand themselves and to understand what reading truly is. 2. Keeping the sensitivities of individual students in mind as writing is incorporated into the reading experience. 3. Sharing, by administrators and instructors of the responsibility for providing the best programs for the students. 4. Finally, always keeping the "human equation" in mind as programs are designed, for, though students may share common academic deficiencies, they are distinctly different in many other ways which, if respected and considered by instructors, would result in improved and happier learning experiences for each adult student concerned.

Consideration of Adults' Learning Styles and Life Styles for Better Literacy Programs: A Discussion

Many adult literacy programs are developed after a diagnosis of students' academic deficiencies -- reading levels, for example. Though students share common academic deficiencies, they are distinctly different in other ways which, when used in developing programs meeting the various needs, have proved effective.

This paper is addressed to the belief that many of the existing adult literacy programs could be improved by consideration of the individual learning styles and life styles of the subjects involved. Fortunately, there are many scholars who have made careful studies of this problem and have offered, as a result of their studies, a great deal of information and definite suggestions for consideration by those concerned with designing adult literacy programs.

Larry G. Martin (5) and two other judges categorized American-born adult high school non-completers (AHSN-Cs), subjects of a 15-month study, into one of six broad life style classifications; their classifications follow:

Entrepreneurs

The two Entrepreneurs were either current or retired owners of private businesses.

Superiors

The two Superiors were either current or retired managers of businesses or organizations.

Regulars

The sixteen Regulars were either current or retired employees of skilled and semi-skilled jobs, such as janitor, file clerk, cook's helper, orderly, and others.

Suppliants

The 27 Suppliants had an indirect means of financial support, such as parents, spouses, unemployment compensation, and siblings.

Marginals

The 23 Marginals relied on public assistance as their primary means of financial support.

Underclass

The nine Underclass had consistently engaged in and had been socially identified through rehabilitative agencies, as committing anti-social acts, such as crime and/or drug abuse. Three sub-groups of Underclass were identified: Underclass-Regulars, Underclass-Suppliants, and Underclass-Marginals.

Statistically significant attitudinal differences were also found in members of the various categories. For example, Marginals were found to be those most likely to be satisfied with things in general and Suppliants were found to be those most likely to feel uncomfortable communicating with those more highly educated, to like school, to be satisfied with things in general, but dissatisfied with their job skills.

Demographic differences were also found. For example, "women were more likely than men to be Suppliants and Marginals." and "Older AHSN-Cs, those with high incomes and fewer people living at home, were more likely to be Entrepreneurs, Superiors, or Regulars."

Learning is always more effective if the student is motivated to learn. Martin seems to feel that the classifications (offered earlier) "differentiate the learning characteristics of AHSN-Cs in several important ways: life experiences, motivation to learn, and roles and responsibilities." An example has been selected under each of these.

Motivation to Learn

> Entrepreneurs and Superiors might seek literacy training only if programs promised knowledge of how they could more effectively and efficiently run their businesses. Regulars might want to further their basic literacy skills in conjunction with vocational job training or retraining programs.

Life Experiences

> Regulars might seek to interpret learning content on "interpersonal communications" in a manner that explained interpersonal relationships with co-workers, superiors, and family members; Suppliants and Marginals might view the same learning content as an opportunity to further understand their interpersonal communications with family members, social workers, store clerks, and neighbors.

Roles and Responsibilities

> Suppliants and Marginals are primary parents, spouses, and users of leisure time. Entrepreneurs, Superiors, and Regulars are primary workers, parents, involved citizens, and children of aged parents.

Needless to say these many differences among subjects require much planning on the part of those administrators who have the best interests of each subject at heart. For example, child care, scheduling -- both time and place -- are among the

many considerations.

It is believed that an instrument for identifying adults' learning styles and using the results to advantage in designing programs is worth considering. Observation over a period of time has always been a means, however, in many cases, time is of the essence; therefore it is felt that instructors might welcome a survey that could be completed in less than a half hour, especially one that provided for grouping of some adults as well as for individualization. The Productivity Environmental Preference Survey by the Dunns and Gary Price (2) purports to do that; it is described in the brochure, a copy of which follows:

PRODUCTIVITY ENVIRONMENTAL PREFERENCE SURVEY

The **P**roductivity **E**nviromental **P**reference **S**urvey (**PEPS**), based on factor and content analysis, is a comprehensive approach to the identification of how adults prefer to function, learn, concentrate and perform in their occupational or educational activities in the following areas:

A immediate environment (sound, temperature, light and design);
B emotionality (motivation, responsibility, persistence, and structure);
C sociological needs (self oriented, peer oriented, authority oriented and combined ways);
D physical needs (perceptual preference(s), time of day, intake and mobility)

The **PEPS** will:

1 Permit individuals to identify how they prefer to learn or work.
2 Provide a computerized profile of each individual's preferred style.
3 Provide a basis for supervisor or instructor-individual interaction in the way(s) that permit each person to concentrate best.
4 Provide a computerized group summary so that instructors or supervisors can group individuals or design work settings based on similarities among productivity elements.

The **PEPS** can be completed in twenty to thirty minutes.

sample items:

I prefer working in bright light.
I often have to be reminded to complete tasks or assignments.
I can block out noise or sound when I work.
When I concentrate I like to sit on a soft chair or couch.
Noise or extraneous sound usually keeps me from concentrating.
The things I remember best are the things that I see or read.
The things I remember best are the things that I see in a movie, book, magazine, photo or diagram.
I like to do experiments.
If I can go through each step of a task, I usually remember what I learned.
I stay at a task till it is finished.
I like others to outline very carefully what they want me to do.

Kornhonen, L. and McCall, R.J. (4) studied the interaction of learning style and learning environment on adult achievement. They used the four styles of learning identified by David Kolb and two levels of learning, rote and understanding. An explanation of the learning styles identified by Kolb is offered by Kornhonen and McCall: it follows:

> Convergers, by using Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation, seem to do best in learning interaction where specific problems have a right answer or one solution. Divergers, by using Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation, organize information and impressions into a meaningful whole. They tend to work with ideas on an imaginative level. Assimilators, by using Abstract Conceptualization and Reflective Observation, are interested in the use of models on a practical level. They bring together different observations and are good at integration. Accommodators, by using Concrete Experiences and Active Experimentation, tend to rely on the judgment and impact of others. They generally solve problems on a trial and error basis (Kolb, 1976).

An explanation of the two levels of learning as used in the study is also offered:

> Rote level of learning is described by Bloom as "those behaviors and test situations which emphasize the remembering either by recognition or recall, of ideas, material or phenomena" (Bloom, 1956, p. 62). Understanding Level of Learning includes those objectives, behaviors, or responses which represent an understanding of the literal message contained in a communication (Bloom, 1956, p. 89).

Following is an explanation of the methodology used by Kornhonen and McCall:

> The samples for this study consisted of ten classes of adults enrolled in a common curriculum of non-credit courses. Five classes were pre-selected as conforming environments and five were pre-selected and structured as independent environments. Adults completed a learning style inventory and a pre-knowledge test during the first class session. At the end of the last class, the adults completed a post-test consisting of 15 questions identified in the Rote Level of Learning category and 15 questions in the Understanding level of Learning category.

In analyzing their data, the authors provided the following three tables:

Table 1

Summary of Analysis of Covariance of Learning Style and Learning Environment

Source of Variation	df	Mean Square	f value	p
Model	8	63.4408	5.96	.0001
Error	111	10.6526		
Corrected total	119			

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Combined Post-Test Measurements

	Learning Style			
	Accommodator	Diverger	Assimilator	Converger
Conforming Environment	17.53 (3.11)	19.20 (2.86)	18.27 (3.45)	18.33 (2.89)
Independent Environment	22.53 (2.10)	18.60 (3.94)	18.07 (4.15)	23.03 (3.06)

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses.

Table 3

Combined Means for Learning Styles

	n	Rote	Understanding
Accommodators	30	10.100	9.933
Divergers	30	9.333	9.567
Assimilators	30	9.233	8.933
Convergers	30	10.600	10.233

Kornhonen and McCall were very modest about their findings. They stated, "Although it is important to note that the variable of learning environment was shown to interact with learning style, perhaps environment should be more narrowly defined to determine which aspects of the environment specifically interact to enhance achievement."

Kornhonen and McCall acknowledged that the results of their study were somewhat different from those of Robert Fox's 1984 study in which the validity of the Kolb model, which they used in their study, was questioned. They concluded that "the search for an ideal instrument for assessment of learning style is an on-going one."

Fortunately, as evidenced by reports which continue to be found in current issues of reputable educational periodicals, there are a number of people interested in finding ways of improving literacy programs and sharing their findings with others.

La Verne Rosow (6), a tutor with Literacy Volunteers of America, interviewed adults enrolled in literacy programs and found that they offered "unexpected cues into the reading process." No one had ever read to them or told them stories; they had been abused as children; they had experienced pain in feeling stupid; they were seeking self-esteem; and, unfortunately, many did not connect meaning with print.

Fortunately, some educators are willing to share their instructional successes with teachers of adult illiterates. Jane

L. Davidson and Thomas E. Wheat (1) describe, among other means, their use of the Language Experience Approach, an approach which has been used successfully by others.

An interesting and revealing incident regarding the Language Experience Approach is remembered: Dino was a young man whose instructor used this approach and felt that Dino was progressing. Another staff member, upon hearing the good news, congratulated Dino, only to be shocked by Dino's response: "That ain't readin'. Readin's in a book."

Decades of experience in the field of reading and related language arts have been convincing in the belief that there is no one way to teach all students. Witness has been borne, on occasion, to vehement protesting on the part of some, to assignments of writing autobiographical an/or character sketches. One young woman claimed it was against her religion to write character sketches.

Some young children and adults have had such impoverished lives and have suffered such abuse that they have either nothing to dictate to their instructors or something too painful to recall.

Fortunately, there are many less-personal language experiences which can be used. Linda L. Thistlewaite (8) has offered several, among them, the following: The instructor might "show the student a newspaper or magazine picture based upon the student's own background and ask for his/her reaction to the picture, or ask the student to give directions on how to do

something." (The latter could be ego-building.)

Instructors have been known to make some assumptions about their students, only to find later that their assumptions were wrong. R. Baird Shuman (7) listed the seven assumptions, made by Mark, about the adult learners Mark planned to teach. Among Mark's assumptions were "these students will be motivated to learn; every adult can read to some extent; and these students have a positive attitude toward school." Mark, as others who have made assumptions about their students, soon realized that his assumptions were not all valid.

Shuman concludes his article with what is thought to be a good attitude for teachers of adults to take. He states, "In the last analysis, what Eugene O'Neill designates 'the human equation' will count for them (the students) more than any element in their learning the skills we need to teach them."

Conclusions

It is concluded that adult literacy programs can be greatly improved by teachers' consideration of their subjects' life styles and learning styles as they design programs for them.

It is further concluded that the adults need to be helped to understand what reading is and what it can do for them. They need to know that it is not the mere calling of words; it is concerned with meaning which can give them valuable information as well as hours of pleasure. They must learn more about themselves -- their best time to study, the best atmosphere, etc.

It is felt that teachers should help the adults to discover and develop their attributes to learning. Janet Hosea Jackson (3) expressed her feeling colorfully as she quoted Brandt (1985, p. 131): "Trying to teach the husks of reading and writing - without the seeds in consciousness and their roots in life - can only baffle students and exhaust teachers."

Implications for Educators

1. Determine the learning styles and life styles of the adult students and use this information to good advantage in designing programs for them.
2. Help them to understand what reading truly is.
3. Help them to understand themselves.
4. Incorporate writing into the reading experience.
5. Take advantage of the shared successes of others found in reputable educational journals, and share your successes.
6. Follow the research concerned with adult literacy.
7. Administrators must share with teachers the responsibility for making available the best programs for each adult concerned.
8. Keep the "human equation" uppermost in mind.

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